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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001034

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: HOTELS CONFIRM GOAM PRESSURE TO DENY VENUES FOR
POLITICAL MEETINGS

REF: YEREVAN 999

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Classified By: DCM Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Two western hotels operating in downtown Yerevan confirmed that the National Security Service (NSS) continues to pressure them to deny rented meeting space to organizations that seek to hold events of a political nature (reftel). Both the Armenian-American-owned "Marriott Armenia Yerevan" hotel and the Italian-owned "Congress" hotel separately said that they have been pressured by the NSS to refuse between ten and twenty requested meetings, each, since Armenia's fatal March 1-2 unrest. The director of a U.K.-sponsored cultural center denied being subject to such pressure, but did not exclude that the center's administrator had been. NSS pressure on foreign-owned enterprises is symptomatic of the authorities' continued reluctance to allow freedom of assembly and determination to keep the screws tight on the opposition. END SUMMARY.

ITALIAN-OWNED "CONGRESS" HOTEL

12. (C) Chiara Figini (protect), the Italian expatriate General Manager of the Congress Hotel, which recently entered into a reservations bookings arrangement with the U.S.-owned Best Western franchise, told Emboff December 22 that the Congress has foregone approximately USD 32,500 in meeting space revenue since early June, when her hotel was first approached by the National Security Service with the directive not to rent space to organizations seeking to hold meetings of a political nature. Figini said that the Congress has been forced to deny rented space requests approximately 20 times in that time period, and recounted how civilian-clothed NSS agents arrived at her hotel in early June to physically bar access to the Congress by the All-Armenian Union of Women headed by the spouse of opposition presidential candidate Levon Ter-Petrossian. Figini said the NSS also continues to pressure the Golden Tulip hotel, another upscale hotel in downtown Yerevan that is owned by the same Italian parent company that owns the Congress.

13. (C) In describing the vetting process for rental space requests, Figini said the NSS directed her hotel to consult with them on all rented space requests that might be considered "political" in nature before either approving or denying them. She said that the turnaround time averages about 24 hours from the time the Congress notifies the NSS to the time they receive the decision, although sometimes it can

last longer. All contacts with the NSS are conducted over the phone. Figini expressed frustration that some hotels were renting space for the same events that the NSS had denied permission to the Congress to host. She said when she recently complained about one such case to the NSS, the case officer defended himself, saying "that hotel is not under my jurisdiction." Figini also said she had been frightened by a recent exchange with the NSS in which the case officer told her "to keep your mouth shut" and "don't make any trouble " when she complained about the continuing pressure to deny venues.

ARMENIAN-AMERICAN-OWNED MARRIOTT HOTEL

¶4. (C) Alex Nurock (protect), the Israeli expatriate Sales and Marketing Manager at the "Marriott Armenian Yerevan" hotel told Emboff December 23 that he was aware of at least ten cases where the NSS had pressured the hotel, most of which occurred right after the March 1-2 unrest. He said the NSS has not "dared" to approach him or the Israeli General Manager of the Marriott directly, and deals instead with the hotel's security chief, who is an Armenian citizen. Nurock said the pressure was "stupid" and "bad for business," but the Armenian-American owners of the hotel and Marriott's regional offices in Germany had decided to "wait out" Armenia's "political crisis" before resuming to rent space to political parties and the opposition. Nurock confirmed that the Marriott's current policy is not to rent space to any political party, neither from the opposition nor ruling coalition.

U.K.-BASED TEKEYAN CULTURAL CENTER

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¶5. (C) The Tekeyan Cultural Center, a non-profit charity operating in Armenia since 1997, denied that it had recently been pressured to withhold space to the newly created Miatsum (Unity) movement that opposes any Armenian concessions on Nagorno-Karabakh. Its director, Armen Tsulikian (protect), told Emboff on December 23 that he was out of the country attending the annual Tekeyan Foundation meeting at the foundation's London headquarters when Miatsum wanted to hold its meeting in Yerevan on November 24, only to be told at the last minute by Tekeyan's administrator -- who manages the Cultural Center's facilities -- that broken water pipes prevented the holding of the meeting. Tsulikian said that "while I have no reason to distrust my administrator," he was not "naive," and is aware of the denied venue issue. That said, Tsulikian said that he personally had not been pressured, and that the Tekeyan Cultural Center has worked to maintain a neutral, open door policy for everyone, "including government structures." (NOTE: In early November, Tekeyan hosted the screening of a documentary film that chronicled the controversial eviction of apartment dwellers in central Yerevan earlier in the decade, in what authorities then argued was an eminent domain case. The film's presenters had been denied space at a popular downtown cinema before approaching and receiving Tekeyan's approval. END NOTE.)

COMMENT

¶6. (C) The deployment of the NSS to curtail the operations of Western-owned or sponsored businesses and centers is symptomatic of the authorities' continued reluctance to allow freedom of assembly and their determination to keep the screws tight on all forms of opposition. It also suggests that the authorities have few qualms about pressuring foreign-owned entities, even those belonging to prominent Diaspora Armenians, in their efforts to control the political

arena. That these entities cooperate with the authorities also demonstrates the degree to which they feel vulnerable in the present environment. At the end of a year in which opposition supporters, independent media, and opposition-linked business interests have been persecuted for their political stances, it is not surprising that foreign entities with substantive exposure here are avoiding actions that could provoke the authorities' ire.

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